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Making Waves

Gloria Molina Takes Charge in Los Angeles

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COVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY GALVÁN

Shaking the House Down

BY BEATRIZ JOHNSTON HERNANDEZ

GARY GALVAN STUDIOS

What lingers is her style: Gloria Molina the confrontational fighter, the outsider who asks tough questions, speaks her mind against dirty politicians, and demands answers with an insistence that makes enemies feel attacked by a pit bull that won't let go.

Molina's tenacity is legendary in California politics. Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund's (MALDEF) voter rights attorney Richard Fajardo repeats an anecdote from a recent Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting. Conservative supervisor Michael Antonovich was in the middle of a monologue against a needles-and-condoms distribution measure to combat AIDS in the county, saying it would not only support drug use, but also encourage the use of drugs by addicts.

"That's ridiculous!" interrupted Molina, the newest member of the powerful board. Her frustration and impatience had hit the limit. "It isn't going to do that kind of stuff." Antonovich turned to her and said icily, "This isn't the City Council, Ms. Molina. This isn't the way we do business on the board."

But Molina had the last word: "This," she retorted, "isn't the way you've done business in the past." And she had the last laugh—the measure passed.

Fajardo says he felt good hearing her speak out. Together with the American Civil Liberties Union and the Department of Justice, he successfully sued the County Board of Supervisors for intentionally keeping Hispanics from winning a Board seat through the way they drew their five districts in 1981. After much legal wrangling, a federal judge ruled against the county and called for an election in a newly drawn Hispanic majority district. The first supervisory district, Molina's, is now 71 percent Hispanic. Fajardo proved in court that before, this community had been divided between two districts so the two incumbent Anglo supervisors could be reelected.

Fajardo initially wanted Los Angeles county Hispanics to have a choice among their own candidates. Now here she was, their "choice"—newly elected Gloria Molina, who is not only Hispanic, but is

also the candidate who reflected the shake-the-house-down attitude of Fajardo and the thousands of other Hispanics who voted for her on February 19, 1991. That day, Molina became the first Hispanic on the board in over 116 years and the first woman ever voted in.

The needles-and-condoms measure was the first sign that the liberals had regained control of the five-member board after ten years of conservative rule. With it, they have taken the reins over a $10.3 billion-a-year budget and a vast range of social service and development decisions for eight and a half million residents—more than the population of 42 individual states.

With the power and visibility of her new $99,297 per year job and the talent she has displayed in reaching Hispanic and other forgotten voters, it's been said that Molina can pursue any political office in California, including governor or senator.

The day after the elections, the house she shares with her husband Ron Martinez and their daughter Valentina was filled with flowers from well wishers, among them some tulips with a note saying, "From all the Latino women in the Valley. Looking forward to the governorship."

Beneath the glitz of her victory, however, lies the root of her success: Molina embodies a new brand of politicians who are critical of the wheel-and-deal political system and its players. At a time when voters are being turned off by politics, she is viewed by many as the only hope for getting laws passed that address the needs of Hispanics.

In an even tone, she says categorically that the politicians she's known are "people who don't serve the community, who don't resolve problems; people who expect to be respected by virtue of their positions—but call them to the table and they don't get involved in partnerships with their constituents. And meanwhile, people are suffering."

Known for her pull with voters, she's not one to charm her colleagues. After Molina, then an assemblywoman, defied Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, the power broker of Sacramento politics, by refusing to cut deals, Democrat politicians shunned her, making it difficult for her to get bills passed, much less get re-elected. She served in the California Assembly only one term. Molina has said time and time again that she's not committed to her image or to other politicians, but to her community.

Many don't think kindly of her. "I've been one that hasn't toed the line," she says, adding that in the world of Los Angeles politics, toeing the line meant sticking to "politics as usual and maintaining colleague decorum, even at the cost of constituents."

David Townsend, who advised her opponent, Senator Art Torres, in the supervisory race, has this image of her: "She doesn't care about barging into a room and taking you out." Townsend adds, "It wouldn't matter to her; she's not one to finesse." He claims that some male politicians have labeled her "confrontational" and a "bitch."

Clearly, sexism is at work in Los Angeles County. "When I was firm and aggressive on an issue," Molina says, remembering her difficult days at the California Assembly in 1982–86, "I would get criticized as being very pushy, yet I could see my male colleagues do the same thing."

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This image of aggression has cost her plenty and has benefited her contenders. "A lot of people supported us because Gloria's too damn difficult," Townsend admits.

Molina says as much—this attitude is nothing new to her. "Every time I run for office, I run across the same situation. When I introduce myself for support, they say, 'I've heard of your style,' then demurely excuse themselves and run to the other camp."

But, she figures, that style "brings me a great following from my constituents." Indeed, exit polls from election day show that all voter groups—women, youth, men, Anglos, Asians, blacks, Democrats, all except Republicans—chose her over Torres, her former boss.

Townsend knew that Torres, a seasoned

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Minerva Perez of KTLA-Channel 5 interviewing Gloria Molina.

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politician at 44, would have trouble against Molina, even though he's just as much a fighter as she is for education, for Hispanics' fair share in redistricting, and for social services and employment.

He had cast himself as the insider, the "mainstream" candidate, and that image was the shovel that dug his grave. His long list of endorsements from well-known politicians including Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and several of the city council, depicted him as "politics as usual," and his history of compromising with fellow politicians to get his bills passed made him untrustworthy in the eyes of the voter. His 1986 support of Richard Polanco for the California Assembly, a man who had fought against a prison in East Los Angeles but, it is speculated, voted to bring it to the floor of the Assembly for discussion on the request of Speaker Brown, made Torres suspect among many informed Hispanic voters.

Despite his $1.2 million in campaign funds (compared to Molina's $700,000); despite a style so smooth, it was said he could charm the birds from the trees, the voters rejected him.

According to Townsend, "Molina's image of beating down the door," on the other hand, "played well to the voters who were mad, gerrymandered, disenfranchised. They wanted someone who wouldn't negotiate, but someone who would go in and kick ass."

Add to this the mood among all California voters. The election took place only three months after voters, furious with their rich, do-nothing state legislators, passed laws to impose term limits, take away their pensions, and cut their staffs by 60 percent. Torres is a state legislator.

One layer below her trademark red suit, Molina is the daughter of two Mexican immigrants who, she says, "suffered greatly." As the first of ten children she inherited the responsibility of setting the example *"para los otros."*

"I learned a long time ago that being a politician isn't as mystical as it seems to be. It's all a very powerful role, but I don't treat it as that grand. We're not special in any way, although we're treated as special. If you toe the line, you're going to get the benefits—a bigger office, a big title, you get to go on trips. But it's all meaningless because back home, people are still suffering."

Many red suits ago, a smooth-faced Molina found her political agenda and her womanhood in the raised shake-the-

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house-down fist of the Chicana feminist movement. She soon discovered that leadership means responsibility in action as she set out to represent Hispanic women through her role as the first president of Los Angeles-based Comision Femenil in 1973. That conviction was with her again in 1982 as she took the oath of office for the California State Assembly, in 1987 for the Los Angeles City Council, and then again this year as she stepped into her newposition with the County Board of Supervisors at the age of 42.

There were times when undoubtedly Molina's great faith in herself faltered temporarily, like in 1982, when her political allies told her she wouldn't have the money, endorsements, nor the qualifications to run for the Assembly. "I was shaking in my boots," she remembers, "but I had to tell them 'I will have all those things,' otherwise I would have folded. I had reservations about a good deal of it, but I wasn't going to let them deny me the opportunity."

Since then, her insistence on not playing the wheel-and-deal game of politics has won her enemies but also the backing of Hispanic policymakers—among them Congressman Ed Roybal (D-Cal.) and Congressman Esteban Torres (D-Cal.)—to promote her own brand of politicians. She's putting her weight behind newcomer Mike Hernandez for her relinquished City Council seat.

Her distaste for behind-the-scenes politicking has made her choose electoral posts on ever smaller ruling bodies, from 120 state legislators, to 15 city councilors, to 5 supervisors to eventually one. But on the other hand, Molina's Deputy Press Secretary Robert Alaniz says, "She's always talked about being the first Latina mayor of Los Angeles."

But achieving such a position means working through one of Molina's biggest obstacles—she doesn't have the big-money backers and coalitions such a campaign would require.

For now, Molina goes to work daily to grill county department heads with the toughest questions they've had to answer to in a long time about how they run their departments, spend their money, and work with the Hispanic community.

Molina, meanwhile, is pushing to persuade the voters to support four more positions at $100,000 a year, plus whatever else the staff and offices will cost the taxpayer. Molina plans to get an ethics reform package approved that would prohibit gifts and honoraria and a ban on outside employment to supplement the members' incomes.

The board, as a matter of fact, just voted in a measure to expand the board from five to seven. However, Molina abstained from voting because, contrary to her colleagues, she wants public hearings on the matter; community involvement. This would tag on to the other major point on her agenda: public participation. But the board meets once a week for three hours to discuss a budget of $10 billion, on a weekday, during normal office hours, while many of the county residents are working.

"She wants feedback from the people on the budget," says Alaniz. So Molina recently moved to have board meetings on Saturdays but was voted down. Says Alaniz, "No government agency wants to point out its weaknesses." **H**

Beatriz Johnston Hernandez is an editor and writer in San Francisco, California.